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Introduction

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The papers in this collection are, as Alan Montefiore has explained in his Preface, the outcome of a co-operative project, initiated by Alan Montefiore of Oxford and Jerzy Szacki of Warsaw and developed under the auspices of the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (Institute for the Sciences of Man) in Vienna. The contributors are scholars from a wide variety of different intellectual fields: sociology, social anthropology, economics, psychology, linguistics, political science, law, legal history, history, international affairs, philosophy. As is to be expected, therefore – and, indeed, as was intended – they have approached the subject from different directions and treated it in different ways; they do not even all have quite the same conception of what the subject is. The result of this might easily have been that their papers simply talked past each other. But in fact, somewhat to my surprise, it seems to me that this has not been the case. (I say this from a position of some impartiality since, although I have been associated with the Institute for a long time, I did not myself become involved in this particular project until the final general conference of the participants in September 1987, at which I took the chair.) Largely due, no doubt, to the amount of intensive discussion and mutual criticism there has been, the meeting of so many different points of view and intellectual methods has resulted in real cross-fertilization rather than sterility.

In this Introduction I shall mainly try to plot some of the interconnections between the various discussions, as I see them. That last qualifying clause is important. For more reasons than one it would be absurd and impertinent for me to pretend to be pronouncing judicially on the contributions _de haut en bas_ as it
were. Obviously I do not agree with everything that is printed between these covers: no person consistently could. Where I disagree in a way that seems to me important I have not hesitated to say so; but of course my own opinion has no greater claim to authority than anyone else’s. The only difference between my own Introduction and the other papers is that my remarks are deliberately formulated with a view to bringing out connections between the discussions of the rest of the contributors. Furthermore, my own primary interest is in philosophical questions; and it seems to me that the philosophical issues raised in a general way by Alan Montefiore’s paper are relevant to the subjects discussed in most of the other papers as well. I shall frequently refer back to this paper in the course of my remarks. I do this in part because the abstraction of its argument may cause difficulty to some readers who are more at home with the more concretely historically and sociologically rooted discussions which predominate and I hope I may help to show the relevance and importance of that abstract argument if one is to come to terms with the historical realities.

The phrase ‘political responsibility of intellectuals’ suggests that there is something about the character of intellectual work which in a special way tends to thrust those who engage in it into the political arena. Montefiore’s paper is an attempt to analyse that tendency. I distinguish the following elements within it.

1. An explication of the way in which intellectual work involves a concern for such norms as truth and validity.
2. A discussion of the way in which the realization of these norms presupposes a certain mode of interaction within a culture on the part of those engaged in such work.
3. A discussion of some of the ways in which such a mode of interaction may typically be threatened by socio-political forces.
4. The articulation of a moral demand on those engaged in intellectual work to defend the conditions which make their work possible against such threats.
5. A philosophical argument which seeks to derive this moral demand from, or ground it in, the very nature of intellectual work.
6. The suggestion that every human being is, in some measure, an ‘intellectual’, that is, engages in intellectual work and is there-
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Therefore (by virtue of the argument in (5)) subject to the moral demand articulated in (4).

In Montefiore’s paper these elements are intertwined in a multitude of complex ways. I have deliberately tried to isolate them from each other in what is, admittedly, an artificial way, because I believe I can thereby bring what I want to say in this Introduction into better focus. I want, first of all, to indicate some of the ways in which elements (1) to (4) above are treated in this volume as a whole. Then, in conclusion, I want to evaluate Montefiore’s argument and to devote particular attention to the elements (5) and (6), which perhaps constitute his most distinctive contribution.

The phrase ‘socio-political forces’, which I used in my formulation of element (3) above, immediately brings into prominence the ways in which the power of the state serves to shape the cultural milieux in which intellectuals work. Elemér Hankiss discusses some of the ways in which such changes may have been brought about and their repercussions on the attitudes to responsibility of intellectuals in post-Second World War Hungary. His paper opens up certain interesting questions without really answering them. For the extent to which the statistical correlations relating to Hungary that he cites can be reliably taken to indicate ‘causal’ connections must wait on detailed comparisons with similar material from other societies. Edward Shils’ paper is a magisterial historical and sociological survey of the multitudinous variety of forms intellectual influence can take and of the conditions that have given rise to very different responses to such influence.

Between the extremes of subservient acceptance of responsibility for the purposes of authority and the insistent claim to arrogate responsibility for guiding and counselling if not actually ruling, between the extremes of utter indifference to any responsibility for the wellbeing of society and the rancorous and aggressive rejection of any responsibility and indeed a hatred which would obliterate any sense of responsibility towards the prevailing society, there is a large and various set of attitudes and actions.

Particularly interesting in Shils’ paper, it seems to me, are the discussions first, of the changes that have been wrought in the position and attitudes of intellectuals by the two great revolutions
of our time (the French and the Russian); secondly, of the roles played by intellectuals in the new states of Asia and Africa; and thirdly, of the fairly recent radical politicizing of the social sciences. Of this last development Shils comments laconically: ‘It is a view widely asserted that objectivity or “evaluative neutrality” is impossible. Of course, this view is incompatible with the scientific aspirations of many social scientists but such has been the force of current opinion that they affirm the view to which they do not adhere in practice.’

Shils’ discussion concentrates attention on intellectuals working, roughly speaking, in the academic humanities and the social sciences; and the same is true of most of the other papers here. Given the enormous preponderance in financial support given by governments and other bodies disposing of funds for work in the natural sciences and technology, it is useful to be reminded that workers in these fields have as good a title to be classed as ‘intellectuals’ too, and that their activities create their own special problems of responsibility. David J. Levy, for example, concentrates on these.

In this connection it is worth noting the important general point that responsibility has two aspects: it is not only an admission of accountability but a claim to power, and these two aspects may be so interconnected that an admission of accountability in some cases can amount to a claim to power.

This is a point which crops up again and again throughout this collection. It is particularly important, for instance in Jacek Kurczewski’s account of the role of intellectuals as ‘specialist advisers’ in the context of both the Gieriek regime and Solidarity. He suggests that the deepest lesson to be learned from those two Polish experiences is the common will to power on the part of experts as well as those whom they advise. ‘Even Gierek’s failed experts were surrounded by an aura of power for those outside the arena, though they themselves explained their failure in terms of lack of power.’ His paper also includes a fascinating excerpt from the proceedings of the National Co-ordinating Committee of Solidarity, in which the precise weight to be given to the opinions of specialist advisers concerning, for instance, strike action is a subject of vigorous and intensive discussion, a discussion which is all the more pointed for being immediately focussed on a pressing
practical issue. Kurczewski warns against the pretensions to power to which intellectuals are prone: 'being “experts” only gave them the right to speak on the same level as Commission members, a formal right to speak, that is to persuade, that is to influence, but not a substantive right to say anything that was authoritative per se’. And again: ‘There are no specialists on strikes except those who have organized them while, at the same time, to have organized a strike does not mean that you will know what to do next time. Changeability of context, contextuality of situation, situational character of decision making – all this speaks against the assumption.’

One particular version of the pretensions of intellectuals to power is to be found in the claims, familiar enough, that tend to be made by the ‘intellectuals of technology’ to be in a singularly superior position to undertake ‘objective’ and well-informed decision making. Levy’s paper is not in fact concerned with evaluating claims that the contemporary technologist’s ways of thinking might offer the key to our problems. On the contrary it presents the fruits of those ways of thinking as themselves constituting precisely the biggest problem facing humanity. It is concerned with a particular fundamental respect in which the advance of technology impinges on human needs in ways which a narrowly instrumental view does not accommodate, namely through its transformation of the human environment. We have reached the point where that environment cannot be taken for granted, as a given sphere in which human beings act and which their actions may, marginally, modify. In the modern world human beings are forced to take responsibility for positive measures to preserve the environment as one in which they can live: ‘while other animals are attuned to survival in a given ecological niche, human beings are responsible for the creation and maintenance of an equivalent space in nature in which their continued existence becomes possible’. Full acceptance of this responsibility would, he argues, require the adoption of a different heuristic approach to our relations with nature: the replacement of Bloch’s ‘Prinzip Hoffnung’ by an ‘heuristics of fear’.

This, of course, raises further questions, not treated in Levy’s paper, concerning the shape such a replacement might take in the institutions which, in our culture, control technological develop-
ment and concerning the role to be taken in such institutions by technologists themselves.

That last point brings me back to one of the central issues raised in Montefiore’s paper: that of the relation between an intellectual’s concern with the standards and values inherent in his or her own professional work and a wider political, or quasi-political, responsibility. Whereas Montefiore’s own principal concern is to establish a conceptual connection between these, several of the contributors are struck by the tensions which may develop between them.

Consider Ernest Gellner’s paper on Julien Benda’s celebrated book, *La Trahison des clercs*, from that point of view. Benda complained of the allegedly disastrous socio-political consequences of the tendency amongst intellectuals to abandon faith in the primacy of absolute, universal standards of reason. Gellner’s discussion rests on the assumption that the most basic responsibility of an intellectual must be, with as good a faith as one can muster, to pursue one’s investigations wherever the argument seems to lead them and then to conduct oneself accordingly. Gellner shows very elegantly the power of the considerations which led those at whom Benda’s complaints were directed to conclude that reason, being a natural human faculty and therefore itself just one element in a natural order of things, cannot validly claim any hierarchical predominance *vis-à-vis* other such elements. The intellectual duty of those who reached such a conclusion in good faith would be to proclaim it and stand by whatever practical consequences they perceived it to have. It would then, argues Gellner, be a ‘treason’ to suppress that conclusion on any pragmatic socio-political grounds, as did Benda.

The naturalistic conception of reason required by Gellner’s argument against Benda is in conflict with the more ‘transcendental’ conception to which Montefiore, at least in his more Kantian vein, is attracted. Gellner’s argument naturally leads to a certain diffidence regarding one’s position as ‘intellectual’; more particularly, perhaps, to a reluctance to claim any special social responsibility for intellectuals as such; and this too is in sharp contrast with Montefiore’s position.

G. M. Tamás voices such a reluctance from the point of view of a somewhat more sombre concession to what he sees as our contemporary ‘Pyrrhonism’ than Gellner’s measured scepticism:
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I think that if a standard of excellence in litterae humaniores cannot be established, a strong doctrine of political responsibility is at best presumptuous. But the search for such a standard seems to run counter to the spirit of the age. One cannot speak of this kind of responsibility except in the name of some truth acquired, taken into possession.

This too, of course, runs strongly counter to Montefiore’s argument. It need hardly worry Montefiore, however: his reaction might well be (as, for the record, would be mine): so much the worse for ‘the spirit of the age’; such an abdication (as Gellner too would surely agree) would constitute the worst sort of intellectual ‘treason’.

J.-J. Lecercle’s piece of ‘Textual responsibility’ is, if anything, even more strongly at odds with Montefiore. He casts doubt on the very sense of the idea that a speaker’s or writer’s words are his, an idea which, of course, is the source of Montefiore’s whole argument. Lecercle’s problem is that the notion of an author’s responsibility relies on a theory that the meaning of what he says springs from his intention, a theory which is in conflict with the insight that language, as a cultural and historical structure, may endow his words with a meaning that he never intended.

I think it is important to see that, in so far as there really is a problem here, it would undermine the notion of an agent’s responsibility for anything that he does, not just his words. A great deal of world literature, after all, explores cases in which the significance of people’s acts is at the mercy of historical contingencies. There is even a popular proverb that the road to hell is paved with good intentions . . .

The importance of this should not be underestimated. It would, however, be a confusion to suppose that it places the whole concept of individual responsibility at risk. What we should conclude from it is rather the need for care in deciding just what, in particular circumstances, an agent (and a fortiori an author) may fairly be regarded as responsible for. It is salutary to be reminded how much more difficult this often is than meets a hasty glance. And no doubt there are special difficulties attaching to an author’s responsibility for the sense that is found in his text and for the further social or political consequences this may lead to. Lecercle’s discussion of cases like those of Ezra Pound and Robert
Brasillach certainly highlights the difficulties and suggests that in certain cases a final resolution of them, and hence a final decision as to responsibility, will hardly be on the cards. But we should lose the moral altogether, so it seems to me, were we to conclude that, because of such difficulties, we cannot rightly hold an individual responsible for anything.

There is a paradox worth noticing when we juxtapose the contributions of Lecercle and Montefiore. The very intertwining of the author’s own utterances and intentions with the responses of others, both to him and to each other, all of which, taken together, constitute a very large part of what ‘language’ consists in, is appealed to by Lecercle to undermine the author’s responsibility and by Montefiore to give a very strong account of it. While, as I shall try later to show, I think that Montefiore tries to extract rather too much from his argument, I have little doubt that the direction he takes on this matter is the one to be preferred. The sense of our ways of talking about responsibility is to be found in the ways in which we do talk, not in some a priori theory about the link between responsibility and intention.

The importance of this point is apparent in Jerzy Jedlicki’s lucid discussion of a prima facie quite different subject: that of collective and inherited responsibility. Here too scepticism springs from a reluctance to acknowledge that a person can be responsible for any state of affairs which is not a more or less direct result of his own intentional action. As Jedlicki persuasively argues, the responsibility which an individual acquires by inheritance, or through membership of a certain nation or of some other grouping, is to be understood not as a liability for punishment or blame, but as the bearing of obligations. This is an idea that gives us little difficulty in ordinary life: ‘For the principle that the debts and obligations of the testator fall on the heir to a legacy is not inconsistent with the principle of individual justice.’

It is implicit in his argument that an individual’s sense of his own identity is largely shaped by the traditions, national, social, cultural, family, etc., groupings to which he belongs. This ‘belonging’ may have something of a brute fact about it with which the intentional acts of the individual in question have had little to do. However, there is also something about it which is not just a brute fact; the heritage is given to us, and on us only depends what
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we do with it. One of the things which depends on us is our acknowledgement of our membership or participation: ‘The historical “we” is an admission – conscious or unconscious – of solidary participation in the life and values, in the glories and declines of a multigenerational community.’ Such an acknowledgement brings with it commitments of one sort and another, whose particular nature will depend, amongst other things, on a history in which we as individuals have played a part. A similar point may be made, for example, with respect to the influence which a particularly strong teacher may have on his or her pupils or students. Here too one may say, with Jedlicki: the heritage is given to us, and on us only depends what we do with it; and again one of the most important things that depends on us is the nature of our acknowledgement of that heritage. ‘The influence of A on B involves B as much as it involves A; assessment of the character of A and of B, and of the relation between them, moreover, has an inescapably ethical dimension. ‘Acknowledgement’ is itself an ethical act which affects the character of the relation and hence the nature of the responsibility of the one or other party to it.

The issues raised by Lecercle and Jedlicki all have to do with the nature and extent of an individual’s responsibility for words or actions which in one way or another are due to other people or to general cultural or linguistic conditions. Grahame Lock is concerned with a closely related problem in his discussion of an intellectual’s relation to the political life of his own society.

On the one hand, Plato was hostile to the idea that the philosopher could ‘represent’ the demands or opinions of other sectors of the population (regarded by him as a form of ‘imitation’). Lock illuminatingly compares this posture with G. A. Cohen’s attempt to demonstrate an incoherence in the idea that one might hold a belief by virtue of one’s occupying a certain social role (though, in considering this comparison, we perhaps need to be more careful than is Lock to distinguish the case of holding a belief from that of expressing it). But on the other hand, in ascribing to the philosopher a duty to tell ‘noble lies’ for political purposes, Plato does seem to acknowledge that to be a philosopher
is to fill a certain social role requiring one to say things which are contrary to what one personally believes. Lock observes that the contemporary social world is very much a Platonic ‘theatocracy’ in which opinions tend to be influential by virtue of the prestige of the person uttering them rather than by virtue of their content. ‘For we now live in a theatocracy . . . Where, in this configuration, is the place of the intellectual? One does not need to be a Platonist to answer: in any case, in the refusal to play the same game; that is to say, in the refusal to play the part of imitator of the masses.’

Lock’s paper can very usefully be considered alongside Ian Maclean’s scholarly discussion of legal interpretation. The role of the professional lawyer, whether advocate, judge, legislative draughtsman, academic commentator, seems to commit one to arguing a case as persuasively as possible whether or not one believes in its veracity. Lock’s comment on this point is that the judge (for example) ‘tells us what, as he – honestly and personally – believes, is the state of the law with respect to some point’. That is, perhaps, an attractive ideal, but it is one which Maclean’s paper shows to be fraught with difficulties. Those concerned with exegesis of the law, he says, are enjoined ‘to act humbly as servants of the text’ but, because there is ‘no absolute guarantee of meaning’, interpretation in fact is, perhaps more often than not, anything but a humble process and interpreters constantly threaten to become masters rather than servants. Maclean does not pretend to give any easy solution to this difficulty and is cautiously pragmatic:

A commitment to seriousness and to truth-telling may not be susceptible to adequate codification, but an explicit recognition by interpreters of the historicity of their role may go some way toward reducing the authoritative claims of any act of mediation, even if this seems to compromise their allegiance to concepts such as justice, equality, fairness and so on which are often held to be universals.

There is some hint of a tension here with the strong defense of the intellectual’s responsibility for such ‘universals’ developed by Montefiore. The tension is stretched further in Maclean’s (surely not entirely mischievous) suggestion that bad faith in interpreting the letter of the law, which the judicial process leaves open to, and to some extent even invites from, both advocate and litigant may